

Pushing for healthy kids

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By Tim Leeds

State Auditor John Morrison Saturday in Havre said the voters in the state have a chance this fall to help thousands of Montana children improve their health, their education and help the state economy in the process. "This is one of the most important personal, family issues in this state and this year we have a chance to do something about it," Morrison told the audience at the Montana Democratic Party's Annual Harvest Day Dinner. Morrison, a two-term auditor who cannot run for re-election due to term limits, was the keynote speaker at the Harvest Day Dinner. He focused on one of the programs he pushed to implement before he left the office of the state's insurance and investment regulator — bringing health insurance to 30,000 of the 34,000 Montana children without it. "It's going to make a huge difference," Morrison said about the Healthy Montana Kids initiative. "It will make the biggest difference in the state since the 1960s. "It's also going to set a model for other states," he added. I-155 will be on the ballot in the November election. Morrison said the work to collect the signatures to qualify the initiative started on St. Patrick's Day, and by June more than 34,000 signatures have been collected. Polls indicate the initiative has about 70 percent support from Montana voters, he said in an interview. The initiative, written by Morrison, proposes raising the eligibility limit for children in Montana from 175 percent of the federal poverty level — among the lowest in the nation — to 250 percent of the federal poverty level. It will also automatically enroll eligible children through a computerized database, sending them a "Healthy Montana Kids" insurance card, and pay for the plan by using part of the money collected from insurance companies through taxes on their premiums, which will be used to collect federal dollars in matching funds. "We're going to put up about 22 million — about one-third of our budget surplus — and get \$70 million in new federal matching dollars," Morrison said. The card will be issued to all qualifying families, whether they are qualified as Medicaid or Children's Health Insurance Plan users. Morrison said the initiative has two key components that would help with enrolling and getting people to use the insurance. One is automatic enrollment through a variety of agencies. When children have contact with participating groups, whether when they are born, receive immunizations, enroll for school or start playing little league baseball, information will be taken down and sent to the state Department of Health and Human Services, enrolling them in the program. Another is a loss of stigma associated with using low-income benefits, Morrison said. Children covered will have a "Healthy Montana Kids" card whether they are qualified through Medicaid or CHIP, with no differentiation between a \$50,000-a-year income and a \$10,000 income. "We will put a new store front on the program," Morrison said. "We're going to make it easy to enroll; we're going to take away the stigma. Morrison said the program, by adding about 30,000 Montana children, will have countless benefits. As well as the health benefits to the children — he listed a series of issues like higher death rates, complications and minor illnesses turning into serious, chronic conditions due to lack of or delay in treatment for children without health insurance — it will benefit the state and its economy in other ways as well. One is in education, he said. Studies clearly show that children with health insurance as a group perform better in school, ranging from classwork and grades and national testing to a higher rate of participation in extracurricular activities. "Kids who aren't insured have a worse health outcome and do worse in school," he said. "This is not just a health issue, it's also an education issue."